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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effect of saliency on the relationships between self-esteem and performance, competency and reactions to feedback. Subjects (N=146) preselected for social or academic orientation engaged in either a social or academic task and were given randomized success or failure feedback concerning their performance. Subjects rated their mood, self-esteem, accuracy of feedback, and attributions about their performance. The relationship between self-esteem and perceived competency was stronger in the more salient area. Additionally, affected cognitive (attributions and assessments) but not affective (mood and self-esteem) reactions to feedback. Subjects attributed failure externally and success internally to a greater extent in their more salient area, and rated the accuracy of feedback higher when given failure feedback in their less salient area, suggesting a consistency model of self-esteem wherein an individual processes specific incoming information in a manner which maintains his level of self-esteem. These results have implications for how information about the self is processed. (Author/NRB)

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Saliency: Key to the Relationship Between Self-esteem and Performance

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That individuals vary in the amount of saliency they place on different kinds of activities is a commonplace observation. Yet this kind of phenomenon has hardly been considered in the literature concerning the relationship between self-esteem (SE) and performance (see Wylie, 1974). Since previous research on the relationship between competency and SE and the effect of feedback on SE have not taken into account the effect of saliency, the findings from these studies have been inconsistent. Some studies (e.g., Coopersmith, 1967; Rosenberg, 1965) reported positive correlations between SE and competency, while others did not (e.g. Warren, 1975; Shrauger and Terbovic, 1976). The areas in which relationships between SE and competency were sought ranged from measures of intellectual abilities to measures of social skills and sociometric choice. However, in none of these studies did the investigators check to see how important the competency measured was to the subject (s). If saliency were taken into account, the relationship between competency and SE would become clearer.

The present study was designed to investigate the effect of saliency on the relationship between SE and performance, including both the relationship between competency and SE and the relationship between reactions to feedback and SE. The two salient areas used in this study were academic (AO) and social orientation(SO).

The first hypothesis of this study was that the relationship between competency and SE depended upon the saliency of that competency to that individual. The more important that competency was to that individual, the higher the correlation between that competency and SE would be. This was expected to be true for both perceived and actual competency, with the effect being more pronounced for perceived competency.

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The second hypothesis was that saliency of task would affect reactions to feedback on that task. Mood and SE were expected to be affected more by feedback concerning performance on a task that was more important to the S than on a less important task. Self-enhancing attributions and interpretations of the accuracy of feedback were expected to be stronger in the more salient area.

In order to investigate these hypotheses, a study was designed in which Ss who placed different degrees of importance on academic competency (AC) and social competency (SC) performed either an academic or a social task and received randomized feedback concerning their performance. Then Ss answered questions concerning their mood, SE, and interpretations of the feedback.

Subjects. Seventy-seven male and 69 female Ss were preselected for high AO or SO on the basis of a questionnaire given to 409 introductory psychology students. This questionnaire had Ss rank how important five different areas were to them and report how much time they spent in activities relating to these areas. In order to be considered high in AO or SO, Ss had to have scored in the top 40% in one area and in the bottom 40% in the other area. Thus, Ss chosen were either high in AO and low in SO or vice versa. Ss were run in mixed sex groups of three to four Ss each. Seven Ss were dropped from the analysis because they expressed disbelief in the feedback or some understanding of the experiment before debriefing.

Procedure. Each S performed either a social or an academic task which was described as representative of either academic or social success in college. The academic task consisted of a series of timed anagram and math problems, while the social task involved having the Ss interact with each other for ten minutes around a given topic. After they had completed the tasks, Ss were given randomized feedback concerning their performance. Half of the members of each group received success and half received failure feedback. This written feedback consisted of a percentile ranking (90th or 50th) and an evaluation of that ranking (excellent or fair).

Ss answered questions concerning their emotional reactions to and interpretations of the feedback. These included ratings of mood, SE (SE Scale, Rosenberg, 1965), internal (effort and ability) and external (task difficulty and chance) attributions, assessments of the accuracy of the feedback, and self-ratings of AC and SC. Actual performance was evaluated by scores on the anagram and math tests and course grades, for AC, and by ratings of social skill by other group members and observers and choices of whom one would like to interact with in the future, for SC.

The basic design was 2x2x2x2 factorial whose factors were saliency, task, feedback and sex. Analyses of variance were performend on the data to test the second hypothesis (the effect of feedback on SE) and correlations were run to test the first hypothesis (the relationship between SE and competency).

Results. Findings concerning the first hypothesis indicated that the relationship between SE and competency did depend upon the saliency of that particular competency. The correlations between AC and SE were 0.36 (n=66, $p < .002$) for AO Ss and 0.16 (n=70, n.s.) for SO Ss, while the correlations between SC and SE were 0.28 (n=66, $p < .02$) for AO Ss and 0.49 (n=70, $p < .001$) for SO Ss. Differences between these correlations were significant at the 0.11 (z-1.23) and 0.08 (z=1.41) levels, respectively. Although these data do not reach traditional levels of significance, they do indicate that there is a stronger correlation between SE and perceived competency in important areas of life than in less important areas.

Saliency had a significant effect on two measures of actual competence. For SC, it had an effect on sociometric choice (F=12.89, df=1, $p < .001$). SO Ss were chosen significantly more often ($\bar{X}$=.46, n=35) than were AO Ss ($\bar{X}$=.18, n=32).[2]

For AC, saliency had an effect on actual course grades (F=2.96, df=1, 120, $p < .09$). There was a tendency for AO Ss to get better grades ($\bar{X}$=.02, n=67) than SO Ss ($\bar{X}$=0.10, n=69).[3] However, saliency did not seem to have an effect on the relationship between actual competency and SE.

Results concerning the effect of saliency on reactions to feedback indicated that the predicted three way interactions occurred for the cognitive variables (attributions and assessments of the accuracy of feedback), but not for the affective variables (mood and SE).

Ss attributed failure externally (F=9.51, df=1, 116, $p < .003$) and success internally (F=3.39, df=1, 120, $p < .07$) to a greater extent for the task which was more important to them than for the less important task (tables 1 and 2. Tukey tests revealed that the AO Ss who were given success feedback on the academic task scored significantly lower on external attributions than did AO Ss who succeeded on the social task, AO Ss who failed on the academic

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[2] These results were scaled so that 1=chosen by all group members and 0=chosen by no group members.

[3] These represented grades of C and C+, respectively.

task, and SC Ss who failed on the social task.

Ss rated accuracy of feedback higher when they were given failure feedback in the less important than in the more important area ($F=4.03$, $df=1, 116$, $p<.05$). Tukey tests showed that Ss who were given failure feedback on their less important task rated accuracy of feedback higher than did the AO Ss who were given failure feedback on the academic task (see tables 3 and 4).

There were no significant between-group differences for SE, but there was, of course, a main effect of feedback for mood ($F=21.76$, $df=1, 114$, $p<.001$). Ss who received success feedback reported better moods ($\bar{X}=5.18$, $n=68$) than Ss who received failure feedback ($\bar{X}=4.10$, $n=71$), indicating that the feedback manipulation was successful.

Conclusions. Results supported both the major hypotheses of this study. Saliency of area had an effect on the relationship between perceived competency and SE and on cognitive, but not emotional, reactions to feedback.

Results concerning the relationship between competency and SE indicated that SE is based on perceptions of competency rather than on actual competency in important areas of life. The lack of findings for the relationship between actual competency and SE might have been due to the fact that the distribution of ability in this college sample might not have been wide enough or the instruments not sensitive enough to pick up differences. However, the measures were sensitive enough to show that actual competency in terms of course grades and who was chosen showed that Ss were more competent in their more salient area, although these differences seemed to reflect motivational rather than intrinsic ability factors.

The fact that relationship between competency and SE depended upon the saliency of the area to the individual supports the use of saliency as a key factor in the relationship between competency and SE. Taking account of saliency might permit the relationship between competency and SE to be investigated more effectively than it has been in the past, particularly in terms of clearing up some of the inconsistencies which have been found concerning this relationship.

These results might have been stronger if there had been a greater difference in the relative importance of the areas used. Although one of the areas was more important than the other to each S, both academic and social activities were important to the Ss. Since each S performend only one of the two tasks, they might have seen this task as more salient than they would have if there had been a comparison. This is supported by the fact that there was a strong reaction to the feedback, regardless of area.

Results concerning the effect of saliency on reactions to feedback indicated that it did have an effect on cognitive variables (attributions and assessments of the accuracy of feedback), but not for the affective variables (mood and SE). Ss attributed failure externally and success internally to a greater extent in their more salient area. Similarly, they rated the accuracy of feedback higher when they were given failure feedback in the less salient than in the more salient area. Ss given failure feedback in their more important area tended to attribute this failure externally and to lower their estimation of the accuracy of the feedback, as compared to those Ss who received success feedback or those who failed in the less important area. That Ss did make these attributions and interpretations of the feedback might explain why there were no results for mood and SE. Interpreting the feedback in this way may have prevented Ss from changing their self-evaluations or feelings about themselves. These results have definite implications for how information about the self is processed and integrated into the self-concept. It would also imply a consistency model of SE whereby an individual processes specific incoming information in such a way as to maintain their level of SE.

Taking saliency into account in the study of SE would suggest an ideographic approach to the investigation of SE. Differences in relationships between SE and behavior may stem from different bases of SE for individuals with different value systems.

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Table 1

Mean Ratings of External Attribution as a Function of Task, Orientation and Feedback

		Academic		Social	
Orientation		Academic	Social	Academic	Social
Feedback:	Success	2.44a (16)	3.35ab (17)	3.81b (16)	3.67ab (18)
	Failure	4.21b (19)	3.44ab (16)	3.69ab (16)	4.52b (17)

Note: Different subscripts indicate that the means are significantly different beyond the .05 level.

Table 2

Mean Ratings of Internal Attribution as a Function of Task, Orientation and Feedback

Task		Academic		Social	
Orientation		Academic	Social	Academic	Social
Feedback:	Success	5.44a (16)	4.88ab (17)	5.31a (16)	5.28a (18)
	Failure	3.84b (19)	4.70ab (17)	4.44ab (16)	4.12ab (17)

Note: Different subscripts indicate that the means are significantly different beyond the .05 level.

Table 3

Mean Ratings of Accuracy of Assessment as a Function of Task, Orientation and Feedback

Task		Academic		Social	
Orientation		Academic	Social	Academic	Social
Feedback:	Success	4.27** (15)	4.35** (17)	5.06** (16)	4.72** (18)
	Failure	2.21** (19)	3.59** (17)	3.62** (16)	2.64** (17)

Table 4

Results of Tukey Tests for Accuracy of Feedback as a Function of Orientation, Feedback and Task

	3.59	3.62	4.27	4.35	4.72	5.06
2.21	1.38*	1.41*	2.06**	2.14**	2.51**	2.85**
2.64			1.63**	1.71**	2.08**	2.42**
3.59						1.47**
3.62						1.44**

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$, for Tukey comparisons